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AUTHOR Schmelzer, Ronald; Ramsey, Imogene
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ABSTRACT

In almost every classroom there is a minority of children that, regardless of effort, teachers have difficulty working with. The "Suggestion Circle" is a method for soliciting streamlined, on-focus ideas for solving classroom problems with the help of colleagues. In the Suggestion Circle there are three roles for people: the person who has the problem (the "listener"); the people providing solutions (the "experts"); and the "leader" who keeps the group on task and serves as the recorder of ideas. The listener tells the experts the problem and the experts offer solutions to the problem. The leader records the solutions so that the listener is free to focus on the solutions. When everyone has had a chance to offer a solution to the problem, the leader gives the list of solutions to the listener and the group disperses before there is a chance to confuse the situation with more solutions. Using this technique, a number of solutions to classroom problems can be quickly obtained. (MM)

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# The Suggestion Circle: A Method for Solving Classroom Problems in Reading and Language Arts--Or Any Other Area!

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Ronald Schmelzer
Imogene Ramsey
Eastern Kentucky University

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There's an old saw that you may have heard. It is called the 80/20 rule (otherwise known as the Pareto Principle). This principle states that the critical elements in any set usually constitute a minority of the elements. Using this principle one could say that about eighty percent of your classroom problems are probably caused by twenty percent (or less) of the number of children that you have in your class. In other words, if you have a class of 30 students you probably devote about eighty percent of the time that you spend disciplining, motivating, or in some other way seeking solutions to classroom problems, focusing on these six or fewer children.

In almost every classroom there is a minority of children that no matter what we try we just have difficulty working with. We rack our brain and still can't seem to come up with a solution. There comes a point in this process of looking for solutions that "the well runs dry"; we just can't think of anymore ideas. If we discuss the problem with our colleagues, it is not uncommon to discover that they bring to the discussion their own concern and that the problem seems to become even more complicated and unmanageable.

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The purpose of this article is to offer for your consideration a procedure that we have used and have found useful for soliciting streamlined, on focus ideas for solving classroom problems with the help of colleagues. The method is called the Suggestion Circle (Clark, Gradous, Sittko & Terhand, 1986).

The procedure is based on the fact that our colleagues are often the best source of information regarding how to solve classroom problems. After all, they are in a similar situation and many of them may have dealt with similar problems. Indeed, some of them may even have been able to resolve them!

The Suggestion Circle is the opposite of brainstorming. In brainstorming we put before a group any idea that may be only vaguely related to the problem under consideration. The ideas tend to feed off one another. Only after all of the ideas are on the table (or on paper) do we define criteria and begin to eliminate certain ideas to discover a possible solution. In the Suggestion Circle each idea is a solution to the problem. Your task is to select from the solutions the ones that you want to try.

In the Suggestion Circle there are three roles for people. The person who has the problem, called the "listener"; the people providing the solutions are called the "experts"; and the "leader" keeps the group on task and serves as the recorder of the ideas.

The listener tells the experts the problem she or he is having and the experts offer solutions to the problem. The leader serves as a recorder and writes down the solutions to the problem so that the listener is free to focus on the solutions.

How To Run a Suggestion Circle

1. Ask the people you are requesting to be experts to sit with you in some semblance of a circle. This arrangement seems to work best since you can then easily see and hear everyone.
2. Clearly and concisely state the problem. It is important to have thought out the problem before hand so that all of the experts can clearly understand the problem you are experiencing. A well defined problem might be stated: "Stephen (who), a student in my third grade class (where) refuses to read when we do Sustained Silent Reading (what). He did participate at the beginning of the year but now he simply refuses to become involved when we do our reading after lunch (when).
3. At this point the experts might ask any questions that might help clarify the extent and nature of the problem in their mind. You will recognize that you have been thinking about the problem for some time and it is possible that you may be seeing it from only your perspective, from deep in the trenches. For example, an expert might ask, "Have you begun to require that only certain materials be read

during this period?" or, "How does he (Stephen) do in the reading group?", and so forth.

Once the problem has been focused--this should not take more than 5 - 10 minutes, you move to the next step.

4. Each expert then provides his considered best solution to the clarified problem. This is done without any more questioning of the listener and is stated in "50 words or less". This brevity helps not only the listener (and recorder) but the expert, too, since the expert must seek to avoid extraneous content. The solutions should be focused and concise.
5. As each solution is given the leader writes the solution on a piece of paper for the listener. The listener, meanwhile makes no comments in either support, clarification or rejection of any of the solutions. The listener simply says, "Thank You" to each of the experts after their solution is given.

   It's important that the experts keep their solutions brief and that the leader prevents discussion with the listener. This is a problem/solution setting not a discussion group. Therefore there should be no comments or evaluative statements regarding any of the solutions by anyone in the group. The leader should keep things in focus and on track.
6. When everyone has had a chance to offer a solution to the problem, the leader hands the list of solutions to the

listener, everyone is again thanked and the group disperses before there is a chance to confuse the situation with more solutions.

Using this technique a number of solutions can be obtained very quickly. In our experience, a 10 minute session may elicit as many as twenty different solutions.

Not all of the solutions will be the ones that will work in your situation. Indeed the 80/20 rule is in operation here, too. However, you will probably come up with some ideas that you haven't though about before and you will have tapped into the best source of expert information available--your colleagues.

Bibliography

Clark, J.I., Gradous, D., Sittko, S. & Ternand, C. (1986). Help! For parents of children from ages six to twelve years. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers.